

Colleges to set tuitions

By Darren Meritz

El Paso Times

For Emmanuel Gomez, an accounting major at the University of Texas at El Paso, the question of tuition deregulation is about who is more in touch with the community — the Texas Legislature or the University of Texas Board of Regents.

"Maybe the university will be closer to the Board of Regents and be able to say, 'This is what we need at our university,'" said Gomez, a senior. "But as a student, after listening to both arguments, I would prefer that it stays the way it is."

In a move that will probably allow public universities the authority to set their own tuition rates for the next few years, the Senate voted 23-8 late Tuesday night to pass the bill, which critics say will exacerbate the rising cost of a college education.

The measure, known as the tuition deregulation bill, provides university governing boards the ability to raise tuition for undergraduate students by as much as \$46 per credit-hour until 2005, and then with no cap until 2007.

The House already approved a similar bill.

The plan goes back to the House, where supporters said they plan to allow schools to go to full rate deregulation by this fall.

Supporters of the bill argue that by allowing universities the authority to set their own tuition rates, the state can find new, innovative ways to finance higher education while costs are rising and money is tight in Texas.

Opponents say that allowing university governing boards tuition-setting authority gives unelected officials the ability to levy a type of tax on students.

As the legislation stands now, the bill would sunset before the 2007 session, and the Legislature would then review deregulation again despite appeals for total deregulation immediately from the bill's supporters.

For Gomez and about half a million other students at Texas public universities, deregulation could give the authority to set tuition rates to governing boards that don't have to be elected or otherwise answer to the public.

"As of right now, I oppose (tuition deregulation) because there is no accountability for the board of regents," Gomez said. "They

really are a little out of touch with the students."

The bill's sponsor, Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, said the bill provides flexibility for universities to set their tuition rates, not total deregulation and not "carte blanche" for university system governing boards.

"I believe the Legislature needs to look closely at the idea of total deregulation," she said.

Before tuition deregulation comes up for review again, lawmakers may conduct an interim study, taking into consideration accountability, affordability and accessibility, she said.

"With the data from the study, we can return ... well prepared to determine tuition deregulation," she said.

Senators had been waiting to make appropriations for higher education because the bill is instrumental in determining how much money will be dedicated to the state's public universities.

The measure was nearly dead until House Speaker Tom Cradick, R-Midland, gave it new life by promising an additional \$500 million in appropriations for higher education in exchange for the tuition deregulation measure.

While tuition deregulation could theoretically affect the rates at all Texas public universities, smaller schools are less likely to see their rates change because of the new legislation, said

David Cockrum, vice president of academic affairs at Sul Ross State University in Alpine.

Rather, Cockrum said, public universities will begin to develop a "tier system" that will allow some universities to be considerably more expensive than others.

"The way I see it is it doesn't affect much little schools. It's a bill for UT and A&M," Cockrum said.

Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso, has argued that tuition deregulation is not the best method to provide resources for higher education while other avenues have not been explored.

"We need to look at several revenue sources, not just a tax on students in the form of higher tuition. If we raise tuition too high, fewer students can afford to go to college," Shapleigh said.

Faculty and staff at universities throughout the state are also casting an eye toward tuition deregulation and what it will mean for communities.

Jon Amastae, director of the Center for Border Studies at UTEP, said a rise in tuition at universities in El Paso and elsewhere may affect the makeup of student bodies because economics will be a bigger factor in enrollment.

"Most of our students' incomes certainly do not have the economic strata where paying for higher tuition is something that's going to be managed easily," Amastae said.

He indicated that several other states allow governing boards to set tuition rates and much remains unknown about how the legislation would influence Texas universities.

"Texas has used a regulated system for many years, and they've made every effort to hold tuition to very low levels," Amastae said. "I'm sure there are a

number of students and families who end up affording institutions like UT-Austin who could pay more."

Whatever the outcome of tuition deregulation, said Richard Adauto, assistant to the president at UTEP, the bill in its current form will only provide university systems some flexibility to set tuition. Nonetheless, UTEP will be careful about how it sets rates for its students, he said.

"We're not going to increase tuition to the point where we price out our students. We have to be careful about where we set that rate," he said.

Students and parents can expect tuition rates to continue to rise as they have for the past two decades with or without tuition deregulation, he said.

"It doesn't include the deregulation that people were trying to get," Adauto said.

J. Robert Brown of El Paso, a regent for Texas Tech University, said total tuition deregulation would diminish state involvement in higher education and could encourage lawmakers to invest less in colleges and universities.

"Our position at Texas Tech has been that we're in favor of some flexibility as far as setting tuition rates, but we're really opposed to total deregulation," Brown said.

As tuition continues to increase, universities could control enrollment by raising tuition and keeping out students who cannot afford higher payments, he said.

Tuition deregulation will "put too much of a burden on students and their families," he said.

Darren Meritz may be reached at dmeritz@elpasotimes.com